



resources for
early childhood

An Online Resource for Ohio Educators



Early Childhood Building Blocks

Phoneme Phun: Learning by Playing with Letters, Sounds, and Words

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INTRODUCTION

*Lauren, age 3, greeted her grandmother: "Hi silly willy billy nilly!"
NaNa replied: "Hello, Lauren, flauren, sauren, bauren!"*

Lauren is my granddaughter—she calls me NaNa. Following this brief exchange, we hugged and dissolved into giggles. Just for fun, we continued the game for several more playful rhymes, including "Nana bana fana wana" and "apple bapple whapple sappple." For both of us, this was a joyful game. But it was really more than that—it was also an exercise in phonemic deletion and substitution that will support Lauren as she continues to learn about letters and sounds and how they work.

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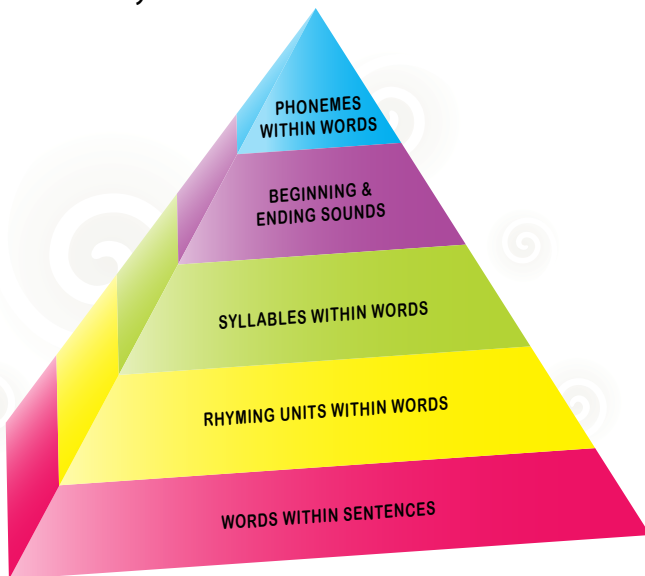
Interest in the relationship between phonemic awareness and early reading has grown as studies have shown that children who are phonologically and phonemically aware tend to learn to read more easily than others. This Building Blocks best-practice brief focuses on phonemic and phonologic awareness and offers suggestions for those who work with preschool and kindergarten children about how they can support phonemic and phonological awareness through playful rhymes, word games, and quality children's literature.

SOUNDS OF LANGUAGE

Children who are phonologically aware are able to notice and manipulate many aspects of spoken language such as words within sentences, syllables within words, and individual phonemes or sounds within syllables. It may be helpful to think of phonological awareness in terms of a pyramid.

The broader base of the pyramid is the awareness that spoken language is made up of individual words even though there are only brief separations between some words as we speak. Moving up the pyramid is the more specific awareness that some words rhyme and that individual words are made up

of parts or syllables. Children who are phonologically aware at this level are able to clap the parts of their classmates' names. Billy gets two claps; Mariah gets three; and Sam, just one. Children may also become aware of specific sounds at the beginning and end of words. Billy, for example, may note that his name begins like Bob and ends like Mary. Finally, at the top of the pyramid is the understanding that words and syllables are made up of individual sounds, or phonemes. Pat, for example, has three phonemes, and Sally has four. It is not important for young children to know terms like phonemes or syllables. What is important is that they understand the concept that English words are made up of distinct parts that can be heard.



LEARNING FROM RESEARCH

Interest in phonological and phonemic awareness has grown in recent years, supported by the work of the National Reading Panel. In its *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction: Reports of the Subgroups* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2001), the panel noted that “correlational studies have identified phonemic awareness and letter knowledge as the two best school-entry predictors of how well children will learn to read during their first 2 years in school” (p. 2-1). The panel also reported that many children, like Lauren, become phonemically aware (PA), as a natural part of their childhood experiences, engaging in playful word games and listening to stories. Others “acquire some phonemic awareness in the course of learning to read and spell even though they are not taught PA explicitly” (p. 2-43).

Further, the panel recognized that there are many, many ways to teach children about phonemic awareness and that brief, yet intentional, attention to phonemic awareness was most effective. The report warned against extended phonemic awareness programs, arguing that “programs lasting less than 20 hours were more effective than longer programs” (p. 2-6).

The Ohio Early Learning Content Standards identify phonemic awareness as an important focus for planning learning experiences for young children.

The four indicators about phonemic awareness are:

1. Identify matching sounds and recognize rhymes in familiar stories, poems, songs, and words.
2. Hear sounds in words by isolating the syllables of a word using snapping, clapping, or rhythmic movement.
3. Differentiate between sounds that are the same and different.
4. Recognize when words share phonemes (sounds) and repeat the common phoneme.

The books and instructional ideas in this Building Blocks brief are excellent tools for teachers as they plan ways for children to gain phonemic awareness. Given that rhymes, songs, and word play all encourage phonological understandings, it makes sense to tap into some of the vast resources found in quality children’s literature to support instruction. There are many wonderful books suitable for young children that foster both a curiosity about words and understandings about phonological aspects of language as well.

PLAYING WITH NURSERY RHYMES AND SONGS

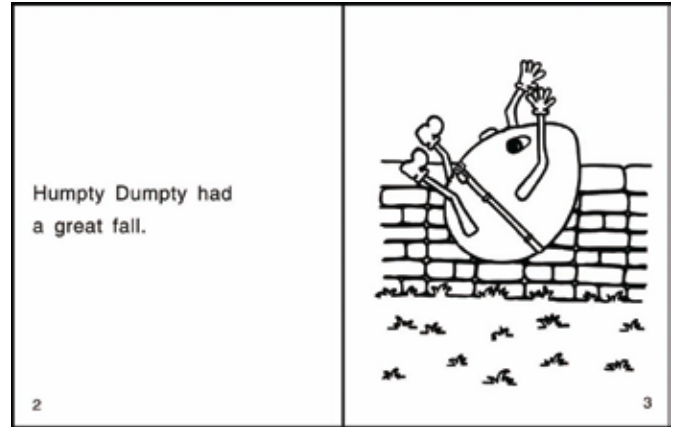
Nursery rhymes and songs are an essential part of exploring the sounds of language. Reading aloud favorite verses again and again helps children to know them well enough to spontaneously break into rhyme at any time!

There are many ways to find rhymes and songs that are just right for your class. The list of children's literature on page 5 is a great beginning. *The Mother Goose* collections by Iona Opie that are illustrated by Rosemary Wells are particularly good for small-group sharing since the books are oversized with colorful illustrations and large type, enabling the children to easily notice the illustrations and print.

Rhymes and songs can also be found in the *Sing a Song of Poetry* series of professional books for kindergarten through grade 2 teachers by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (2003). These books offer a large-print version of a single verse on each page, making them suitable for copying so that the children can have their own copies to read at school and at home.

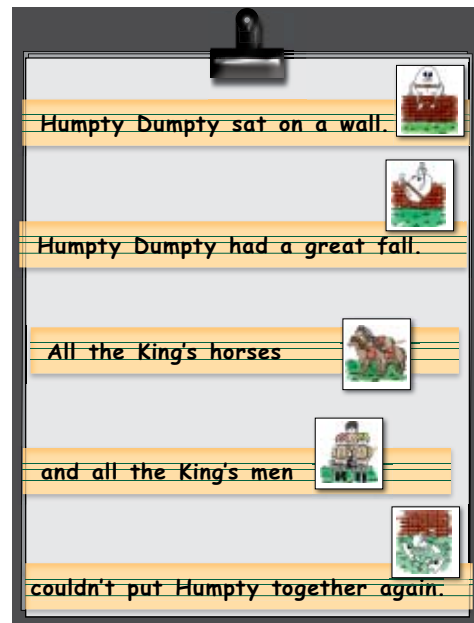
You could also use the Nursery Rhymes or Rhymes and Songs sets of KEEP BOOKS to make an important school-home connection and help your students learn more about language. KEEP BOOKS are small, inexpensive little books designed by literacy experts at Ohio State University to provide interesting, engaging books for young readers to take home to "keep" (www.keepbooks.org).

You might begin by teaching the children, say, *Humpty Dumpty*, using hand motions so they listen and enjoy the rhythm and rhymes of the verse.



From the KEEP BOOK *Humpty Dumpty*.

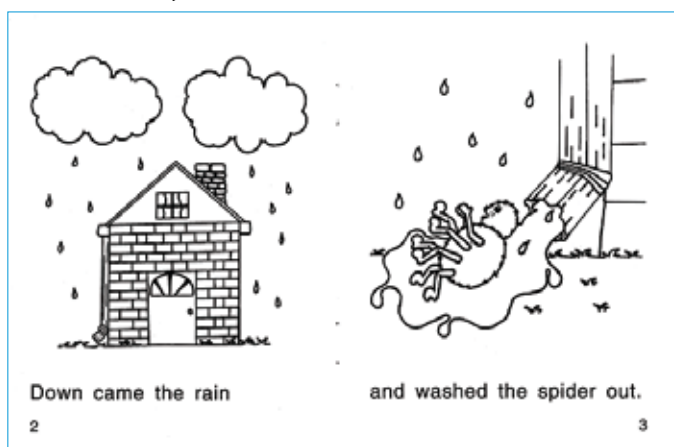
Later, when the children know it by heart, you can show the class a chart of the rhyme and read it together, pointing to each word as you read.



The words and illustrations in the chart are taken from the same KEEP BOOK (*Humpty Dumpty*) that was read aloud to the children

After enjoying the shared reading at school, your children will be excited to take home the little book or a copy of the verse so they can enjoy the rhymes and songs with their families. Some children may be able to follow along with the verse by pointing to each word and learn when to turn the page or move from line to line as the verse continues.

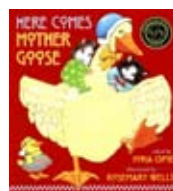
The pictures illustrating nursery rhymes and poems also play an important role. For example, the strong picture support in *The Itsy Bitsy Spider* helps young readers to notice individual words and perhaps the beginning letters of some. Both are important early reading behaviors that can be taught while enjoying a beloved rhyme.



From the KEEP BOOK *The Itsy Bitsy Spider*.

The Yolen collection of rhymes is illustrated by Will Hillenbrand and includes a free CD for “playtime, naptime, anytime”—a great way to introduce a verse through listening. The urban version of Mother Goose by Nina Crews offers photo illustrations in city settings, and *Miss Mary Mack* by Hoberman and Westcott may remind some teachers of the street rhymes of their childhood.

Try these:



Here Comes Mother Goose by Iona Opie, illustrations by Rosemary Wells (Candlewick Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999)



My Very First Mother Goose by Iona Opie, illustrations by Rosemary Wells (Candlewick Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996)



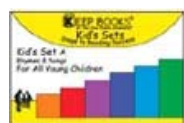
Miss Mary Mack by Mary Ann Hoberman, illustrations by Nadine Bernard Westcott (Little, Brown, Boston, 1998)



The Neighborhood Mother Goose by Nina Crews (Greenwillow Books, New York, 2004)



Nursery Rhymes by KEEP BOOKS. www.keepbooks.org (The Ohio State University, Columbus)



Rhymes and Songs by KEEP BOOKS. www.keepbooks.org (The Ohio State University, Columbus)



This Little Piggy and Other Rhymes to Sing and Play by Jane Yolen, illustrations by Will Hillenbrand (Candlewick Press, Cambridge, MA, 2005)

PLAYING WITH WORDS

Books in this category take a playful approach to storytelling or poetry. Denise Fleming's recent book, *The Cow Who Clucked*, begins with a cow who has lost his "moo"! "The first thing I must do," said Cow, "is find my moo." Within the first page, Fleming's text employs rhyme to capture the interest of young listeners yearning to find out how the cow will solve his problem. Each two-page spread features the sounds of a different barnyard animal who clearly does not have Cow's moo until "The cow shuffled past Hen. 'Cluck, cluck,' said Cow. 'Moo, moo,' said Hen." And the lost is found!

A duck is the main character of Phyllis Root's *One Duck Stuck*, a duck who is clearly "stuck in the muck"! The different forest friends, including "three moose munching on spruce" and "nine snakes leaving little wakes," who try to help are unsuccessful until they all work together to help "the duck who got stuck in the muck." Children will notice the final endpaper, which shows the moose now stuck in the muck, and may be inspired to write their own moose story with similar playful language.

Playing a game with words is even part of the title of *A Huge Hog Is a Big Pig: A Rhyming Word Game* by Francis McCall and Patricia Keeler. Colorful photographs invite young listeners to solve such word puzzles as "A cozy beetle is a..." before turning the page to find the rhyming answer (snug bug). Bernard Most plays similar riddle games in his

book *Zoodles*, asking questions like "What do you call a crab that steals carrots?" The answer, of course, is a crabbit! Listening to these books will encourage young listeners to listen carefully and enjoy the ways writers play with the sounds of words to share a story or poem.

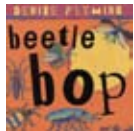
Try these:



Baby Buggy, Buggy Baby by Harriet Ziefert, illustrations by Richard Brown (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1997)



Bears by Ruth Krauss, illustrations by Maurice Sendak (HarperCollins, New York, 2005)



Beetle Bop by Denise Fleming (Henry Holt, New York, 2007)



Car Wash by Sandra Steen and Susan Steen, illustrations by G. Brian Karas (G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 2001)



The Cow Who Clucked by Denise Fleming (Henry Holt, New York, 2006)



Cows in the Kitchen by June Crebbin, illustrations by Katharine McEwen (Candlewick Press, Cambridge, MA, 1998)



Green as a Bean by Karla Kuskin, illustrations by Melissa Iwai (HarperCollins, New York, 2007)



A Huge Hog Is a Big Pig: A Rhyming Word Game by Francis McCall and Patricia Keeler (Greenwillow Books, New York, 2002)



One Duck Stuck by Phyllis Root, illustrations by Jane Chapman (Candlewick Press, Cambridge, MA, 1998)



Max's Words by Kate Banks, illustrations by Boris Kulikov (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2006)



Plumply, Dumpy Pumpkin by Mary Serfozo, illustrations by Valerie Petrone (Simon & Schuster, New York, 2001)



Miss Mary Mack by Mary Ann Hoberman, illustrations by Nadine Bernard Westcott (Little, Brown, Boston, 1998)



Quiet Night by Marilyn Singer, illustrations by John Manders (Clarion, New York, 2002)



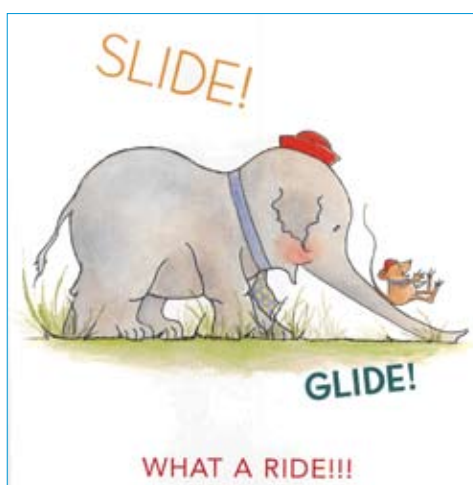
Night knight by Harriet Ziefert, illustrations by Richard Brown (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1997)

RHYMES AND RHYTHMS

Books that play with rhyming sounds are both entertaining and instructional. For example, children will enjoy the rhymes of *Hop! Plop!* by Corey Rosen Schwartz and Tali Klein. The illustrations by Olivier Dunrea offer colorful words and interesting placement on the page. The authors also have [a website](#) with suggested activities related to the book.

Names are the focus of rhymes in Eschbacher's *Nonsense! He Yelled*. The poems in this book may inspire young writers to

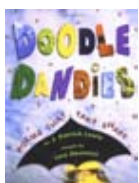
explore their own names, imitating the style that the author uses when he describes Art who is smart and has been "from the start" or Lyle who has a brother named Kyle running from a crocodile!



From *Hop! Plop!* Reprinted by permission of Walker & Co.

The very first page of *Hey You! C'mere: A Poetry Slam* by Elizabeth Swados encourages readers to be both the poet and the poem. A favorite poem from this book involves a very long piece of spaghetti—"It's wrapped around my elbows, It's tangled in my toes, It doesn't seem to stop, It's going up my nose..."

Try these:



Doodle Dandies: Poems That Take Shape by J. Patrick Lewis, illustrations by Lisa Desimini (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1998)



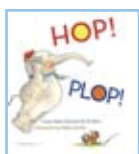
Down by the Cool of the Pool by Tony Mitton, illustrations by Guy Parker-Rees (Orchard Books, New York, 2002)



Fiddle-I-Fee by Will Hillenbrand (Gulliver Books, New York, 2002)



Hey You! C'mere: A Poetry Slam by Elizabeth Swados, illustrations by Joe Cepeda (Arthur A. Levine Books, New York, 2002)



Hop! Plop! by Corey Rosen Schwartz and Tali Klein, illustrations by Olivier Dunrea (Walker, New York, 2006)



I Heard a Little Baa by Elizabeth MacLeod, illustrations by Louise Phillips (Kids Can Press, Tonawanda, NY, 1998)



Nonsense! He Yelled by Roger Eschbacher, illustrations by Adrian Johnson (Dial, New York, 2002)



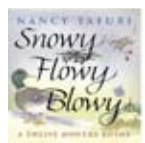
One Ted Falls Out of Bed by Julia Donaldson, illustrations by Anna Currey (Henry Holt, New York, 2006)



One Two Three Me by Jeremy Fitzkee, illustrations by Nadia Budde (Viking, New York, 2006)



Pass the Fritters, Critters by Cheryl Chapman, illustrations by Susan L. Roth (Four Winds Press, New York, 1993)



Snowy Flowy Blowy: A Twelve Months Rhyme by Nancy Tafuri (Scholastic, New York, 1999)



Wiggle Waggle Fun: Stories and Rhymes for the Very Very Young by Margaret Mayo (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2002)

ALLITERATION

Playing with groups of words that start with the same letter or sound is often enjoyed by young children whether in the form of a tongue twister or one of the stories in this section. Ann Jonas writes that her motivation to write an entire story with words beginning with only one letter “came about while I was playing word games with myself. The question I posed was: How far can I carry alliteration to make a complete, logical sentence?” The result

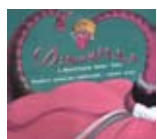
of her challenge was *Watch William Walk*, written entirely with words starting with the letter *W*. Jonas’s illustrations provide multiple visual perspectives of William during his walk and make an important contribution to the meaning of this text. Jonas also commented that the challenges of writing such a strongly alliterative book were so great that readers need not anticipate a 26-book series!

The books in the list below by Pamela Duncan Edwards and Bernard Most could be the beginning of an author study, as each is an accomplished author of children's books—some with strong alliterations or word play characteristics and others

Try these:



The Awful Aardvarks Go to School by Reeve Lindbergh, illustrations by Tracey Campbell Pearson (Penguin Books, New York, 1997)



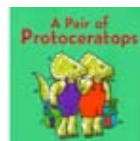
Dinorella: A Prehistoric Fairy Tale by Pamela Duncan Edwards, illustrations by Henry Cole (Hyperion, New York, 1997)



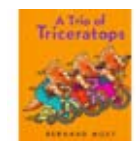
Four Famished Foxes and Fosdyke by Pamela Duncan Edwards, illustrations by Henry Cole (HarperTrophy, New York, 1995)



Some Smug Slug by Pamela Duncan Edwards, illustrations by Henry Cole (HarperTrophy, New York, 1996)



A Pair of Protoceratops by Bernard Most (Harcourt Brace, San Diego, CA 1998)



A Trio of Triceratops by Bernard Most (Harcourt Brace, San Diego, CA, 1998)



Six Sandy Sheep by Judith Ross Enderle and Stephanie Gordon Tessler, illustrations by John O'Brien (Boyd's Mills, Honesdale, PA, 1997)



Watch William Walk by Ann Jonas (Greenwillow Books, New York, 1997)

ABC'S

Every year, authors and illustrators create yet another way to play with the 26 letters of the English alphabet. Max is one of Rosemary Wells's most beloved characters, along with his older sister, Ruby, who typically tolerates Max's antics with sighs that also reveal considerable affection for her little bunny brother. The endpapers in *Max's ABC* are covered with both letters and tiny black

ants, foreshadowing the problem that readers will encounter as they march through the alphabet enjoying Max's attempts to rid himself of the ants who have escaped from his ant farm. Finally, the ants are captured in the vacuum cleaner (on the V page, of course) and soon they were home fast asleep (ZZZZZ).

June Sobel's *Shiver Me Letters: A Pirate ABC* also employs a story format, beginning with a pirate captain who needs more than "RRRRR" to make him tough, and so he sends his crew on a search of the rest of the alphabet.

The endpapers of Bob McLeod's *Superhero ABC* are cartoon-strip blocks in muted electric blue

tones, each containing both a letter and one of 26 superheroes. Aa is for Astro-Man who "is always alert for an alien attack," and Ff is for The Firefly who "fights felons in the forest." The bold comic-book-like illustrations with speech bubbles are sure to spark conversation on each page.

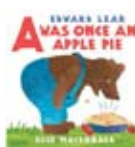
Try these:



A Is for...? A Photographer's Alphabet of Animals by Henry Horenstein (Harcourt Brace, Orlando, FL, 1999)



A My Name Is... by Alice Lyne, illustrations by Lynne Cravath (Whispering Coyote Press, Boston, 1997)



A Was Once an Apple Pie by Edward Lear, illustrations by Suse MacDonald (Scholastic, New York, 2005)



ABC T-Rex by Bernard Most (Harcourt, San Diego, CA, 2000)



Alice and Aldo by Alison Lester (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1998)



Alphabet House by Nancy Elizabeth Wallace (Marshall Cavendish, New York, 2005)



C Is for City by Nikki Grimes, illustrations by Pat Cummings (Boyd's Mills Press, Honesdale, PA, 1995)



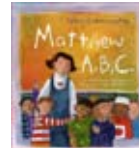
From Anne to Zach by Mary Jane Martin, illustrations by Michael Grejniec (Boyd's Mills Press, Honesdale, PA, 1996)



Girls A to Z by Eve Bunting, illustrations by Suzanne Bloom (Boyd's Mills Press, Honesdale, PA, 2002)



Little Bird's ABC by Piet Grobler (Front Street, Honesdale, PA, 2005)



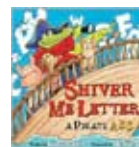
Matthew A.B.C. by Peter Catalanotto (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, New York, 2002)



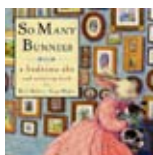
Max's ABC by Rosemary Wells (Viking, New York, 2006)



Picture a Letter by Brad Sneed (Phyllis Fogelman Books New York, 2002)



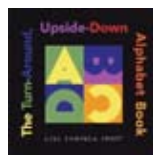
Shiver Me Letters: A Pirate ABC by June Sobel, illustrations by Henry Cole (Harcourt, Orlando, FL, 2006)



So Many Bunnies: A Bedtime ABC and Counting Book by Rick Walton, illustrations by Paige Miglio (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, New York, 1998)



SuperHero ABC by Bob McLeod (HarperCollins, New York, 2006)



The Turn-Around, Upside-Down Alphabet Book by Lisa Campbell Ernst (Simon & Schuster, New York, 2004)



Word Play ABC by Heather Cahoon (Walker & Co., New York, 1999)

INTENTIONAL TEACHING FOR ENJOYMENT AND MORE

All the books suggested in this resource offer young listeners opportunities to develop an appreciation of quality children's books and a love of reading. Reading these books will often end with an enthusiastic "Read it again!" from the class. Through repeated readings, children will learn favorites by heart and learn much about the sounds of language.

The key is for you to be intentional in their use of these books and to encourage children to sing along, respond to the language, enjoy their favorite word play, and become language enthusiasts ever listening for yet another way to cleverly play with words like the authors of these books.*

* There are even more books that emphasize phonemic awareness in the Early Childhood Bookshelf on the REC website. Explore "[Playing with Words: Poetry in Preschool, Phonemic Awareness](#)" and "[Literacy Begins with Rhythm, Rhyme, and Song](#)."

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About the Author

Patricia L. Scharer is a professor in the College of Education and Human Ecology at The Ohio State University. Her research interests include early literacy development, phonics and word study, and the role of children's literature to foster both literary development and literacy achievement. Her research has been published in *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Educational Leadership*, *Language Arts*, *The Reading Teacher*, *Reading Research and Instruction*, and the yearbooks of the National Reading Conference and the College Reading Association.

She has served as coeditor of the *Journal of Children's Literature*, *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, and the Children's Books column of *The Reading Teacher*. Professor Scharer is also coeditor of *Extending Our Reach: Teaching for Comprehension in Reading, Grades K-2*, and *Guiding K-3 Writers to Independence: The New Essentials*. She is coauthor of *Rethinking Phonics: Making the Best Teaching Decisions*. Currently, she is a member of the national Literacy Collaborative Trademark Committee and is conducting federally funded research in partnership with the University of Chicago, Lesley University, and Stanford University.

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ohio.org Ohio Resource Center
for Mathematics, Science, and Reading



For more information

Contact Nancy Brannon at nbrannon@ohiorc.org or Nicole Luthy at nluthy@ohiorc.org. Visit <http://rec.ohiorc.org> to see the REC website. Also see other [Early Childhood Building Blocks](#).

Early Learning Content Standards

Pre-K
Indicators

Kindergarten
Indicators

Grade 1
Indicators

Grade 2
Indicators

Grade 3
Indicators

Phonemic Awareness, Word Recognition and Fluency Standards

Pre-K–2 Benchmark

A. Use letter-sound correspondence knowledge and structural analysis to decode words

- | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify matching sounds and recognize rhymes in familiar stories, poems, songs and words (e.g., cat/hat, dog/frog). Hear sounds in words by isolating the syllables of a word using snapping, clapping or rhythmic movement (e.g., cat, ap-ple). Differentiate between sounds that are the same and different (e.g., environmental sounds, animal sounds, phonemes). Recognize when words share phonemes (sounds) and repeat the common phoneme (e.g., /b/ as in Bob, ball, baby; /t/ as in Matt, kite, boat). Recognize and name some upper and lower case letters in addition to those in first name. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and complete rhyming words and patterns. Distinguish the number of syllables in words by using rhythmic clapping, snapping or counting. Distinguish and name all upper and lower case letters. Recognize, say and write the common sounds of letters. Distinguish letters from words by recognizing that words are separated by spaces. Hear and say the separate phonemes in words, such as identifying the initial consonant sound in a word, and blend phonemes to say words. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and distinguish between letters, words and sentences. Identify and say the beginning and ending sounds in words. Demonstrate an understanding of letter-sound correspondence by saying the sounds from all letters and from a variety of letter patterns, such as consonant blends and long- and short-vowel patterns, and by matching sounds to the corresponding letters. Decode by using letter-sound matches. Use knowledge of common word families (e.g., -ite or -ate) to sound out unfamiliar words. Blend two to four phonemes into words. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify rhyming words with the same or different spelling patterns. Blend phonemes (sounds) of letters and syllables to read unknown words with one or more syllables. Use knowledge of common word families (e.g., -ite or -ate) to sound out unfamiliar words. Segment letter, letter blends and syllable sounds in words. Distinguish and identify the beginning, middle and ending sounds in words. Identify words as having either short- or long-vowel sounds. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify rhyming words with the same or different spelling patterns. Use letter-sound knowledge and structural analysis to decode words. Use knowledge of common word families (e.g., -ite or -ate) and complex word families (e.g., -ould, -ight) to sound out unfamiliar words. |
|--|--|--|--|---|